

Debates on Examinations in the Netherlands 1815–1876: The Entrance Examination

Leen Dorsman
Universiteit Utrecht

In 1845 a bookseller from The Hague published a pamphlet by an anonymous author: *Iets over ons Hooger Onderwijs* (transl. Something about our Higher Education). The text however revealed that the author was an insider from Leiden University, possibly a student from the theological faculty. The pamphlet contained a litany of grievances against the university. The author accused the professors of not being equal to the tasks they were hired for: bad teachers and scientific nullities. He also took note that students were seen by society at large as lazy creatures and foolhardy squanderers. And examinations were an absolute travesty. *Attending* lectures in the most literally sense was often enough to pass a course.¹

It was broadly felt that Dutch universities were in decline. The observations by the anonymous pamphleteer were confirmed in a review in the monthly magazine *De Gids* (transl. *The Guide*), which was the voice of a young, critical cultural elite. According to this critic many students after graduation didn't feel equipped for a position in society. They were very disappointed and did not have affectionate feelings for their university. "The heart loaths her like she loathes a fornicating woman", he wrote.²

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century in the Netherlands we find an outspoken contempt for the university and its professors and students. This of course is partly one of the *topoi* of a centuries old rhetoric used for what was regarded as a leisure class living in a world of its own. But it also was real criticism and likewise heard from within academia. Part of the criticism relates to examinations, or better: the lack of it. Examination was a constantly debated topic because it was seen as one of the ways to tackle the fundamental problems

1 *Iets over ons Hooger Onderwijs*, 's Gravenhage, P. C. Dill, 1845, p. 17.

2 *De Gids*, 9, 1845, p. 601. See: L. Dorsman, "'Het hart walgt van haar als van een boeleeerster.' Het aanzien van de Nederlandse universiteiten 1830–1850", in L. J. Dorsman, P. J. Knechtmans (ed.), *Universiteit, publiek en politiek. Het aanzien van de Nederlandse universiteiten 1800–2010*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2012, p. 29–48.

of the university. This contribution addresses this discussion and pursues particularly the discussion on entrance examinations.

The Royal Decree of 1815

After the French occupation ended in 1813 the Netherlands experienced no less than a revolution. The once strongly divided republic with autonomous provinces became almost overnight a unified monarchy with a constitution, which was enacted in 1814. After that a wide range of legal problems had to be solved and to speed up legislation many issues were regulated not by formal law, but by Royal Decrees. Also in 1814 a royal commission was installed to prepare the regulation of higher education. The commission's report presented the universities as autonomous corporate bodies with their own jurisdiction, with self-rule and independent from the state. It became immediately clear that this was typical *ancien régime* thinking and not the direction the new kingdom envisaged. Universities were destined to be public institutions with government supervision, especially on teaching. It was in this vein that the concept text of the decree was redrawn and published in 1815. The decree stayed for the greatest part intact until in 1876 a law on higher education was issued.³ It was also the beginning of a lasting controversy about state regulation in higher education.

What was exactly regulated in the 1815 decree regarding matriculation and entrance to the university? Especially important were articles 148 and 149. The first one determined that every new student had to report to the *rector magnificus* to be matriculated and the latter that matriculation was only possible for those who were able to produce a testimonial submitted by the board of governors of a so-called Latin School, declaring that this student was competent to follow the lessons at the university.⁴ Article 149 was controversial already from the start

3 Royal Decree n° 14 of 2 August 1815. Following the incorporation of the former Austrian Netherlands in the monarchy in 1815, in 1816 regulations were issued for the southern universities. Because the kingdom fell apart in 1830 we will concentrate on the decree of 1815. A Royal Decree does not have the status of law, which makes it quite easy to make amendments, which meant that there was not so much pressure on law making regarding higher education. After the new, liberal, constitution of 1848 the idea was to formulate a law on higher education. Concept laws were drafted in 1868, 1869 and 1874. For several political reasons - not related to this issue - it lasted until 1876 when a law on higher education replaced the decree of 1815.

4 Sometimes a Latin School was also called a Gymnasium. This is rather confusing because in the course of the nineteenth century - especially in the 1860's - the Latin Schools disappeared or were converted into Gymnasias. In a report by a royal commission in 1828 the idea is formulated that even though the Latin School prepared for the university, it was the Gymnasium proper that had as the sole purpose the preparation for the university. It was regarded as an integral part of the higher education system of the Netherlands. W. F. Roëll, *Rapport der commissie, bijeengeroepen door Koninklijk Besluit van 13 April 1828, no.100, ter raadpleging over sommige punten betreffende het hooger onderwijs*, 's Gravenhage, Algemeene Landsdrukkerij, 1830, p. 8.

because there was a huge difference in the quality of the Latin Schools as well as a difference in the willingness to produce a testimonial by the boards of the schools. Further articles (150 and 151) regarded those who did not have such a testimonial because they received home education or who came from abroad. They were obliged to sit for an oral examination with professors from the faculty of Letters and Philosophy. The specific provision that such an entrance examination had to be taken in this faculty demonstrates how much importance the authors of the decree attached to the humanities.

The Royal Decree of 1815 has often been maligned and considered as already out of date at the moment it was issued.⁵ There are reasons for that because it favoured social reproduction of the wealthy and ruling classes and stimulated neo-classicist humanities by making Latin the compulsory language at the university. It also required foundation courses in the faculty of Letters for those who wanted to study law and theology. On the other hand the decree provided for a new, national, Dutch university system. It also made it possible to split the former *Artes* faculty into the above mentioned faculty of Letters and Philosophy and a faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, which was quite modern and a direct influence of the French university system.⁶

In the 1820's much dissatisfaction arose with higher education. Partly this had political roots in the growing discontent in the southern part of the kingdom with the alleged dominance of the northern provinces.⁷ But it also was experienced more and more as an overregulated system of testimonia and strictly defined courses. The dissatisfaction was so broadly voiced that the government installed a commission (1828) to explore possible answers to a whole series of questions. These questions were published to stimulate discussion and to provoke written answers from interested parties. The commission published a report in 1830, but then it was already too late: the southern provinces rebelled and broke away to become the Kingdom of Belgium. The report of the commission for the most part disappeared in a drawer.

5 J. C. M. Wachelder, *Universiteit tussen vorming en opleiding. De modernisering van de Nederlandse universiteiten in de negentiende eeuw*, Hilversum, Verloren, 1992, p. 62-80; W. Otterspeer, *De wiek-slag van hun geest. De Leidse universiteit in de negentiende eeuw*, Den Haag, Stichting Hollandse Historische Reeks, 1992, p. 5-6; P. Baggen, *Vorming door Wetenschap. Universitair onderwijs in Nederland 1815-1960*, Delft, Eburon, 1998, p. 58-63; K. Van Berkel, *Universiteit van het Noorden. Vier eeuwen academisch leven in Groningen*, Deel 1, *De oude universiteit 1614-1876*, Hilversum, Verloren, 2014, p. 513-519.

6 Article 56.

7 An important issue concerned the training of the catholic clergy. The government wanted to have a hold on the catholic clergy and decided in 1825 that future priests first had to attend for two years a so called *Collegium Philosophicum* at Leuven university. This, of course, led to much agitation among the bishops. See: P. Dhondt, *Un double compromis. Enjeux et débats relatifs à l'enseignement universitaire en Belgique au XIX^e siècle*, Gent, Academia Press, 2011, p. 68-73.

The role of the Classics

The report and the reactions to it nevertheless are interesting documents because they provide an overview of opinions that existed on the higher education system of the Netherlands. One section of the report was devoted to the problem that too many students came badly prepared to the university. It was widely acknowledged that the real problem was the quality of the Latin Schools and some of the Gymnasia. Because it was not to be expected that this problem would have been solved quickly, the idea was that everyone who opted for entering the university had to take an examination.⁸ The commission also advised to name the school the student was coming from on the certificate. Then it would become clear very soon which schools were performing well or not.⁹ In general, at that moment there seemed not to be much opposition to the idea of an entrance examination. Although from time to time it surfaced as a possible solution to the problem of the quality of the students, no decisions were taken until the 1840's. An anonymous pamphlet in 1830 asked for "adequate investigation" by the faculty of Letters and Philosophy, although the author did not call it an examination proper.¹⁰

It was not only the quality of the incoming students which was felt as problematic. Associated with it was the more general question of state interference in higher education: to what degree the state was allowed to intervene in educational processes? A great part of the debates on higher education in the Netherlands in this period – like this one – can be illustrated by a single book. In 1829 a very influential – and controversial, because in some circles it was seen as utterly conservative – text on higher education in the Netherlands appeared, *Brieven over den aard en de strekking van Hooger Onderwijs*.¹¹ It was written by Philip Willem van Heusde (1778–1839), professor in History, Latin, Greek, and Rhetoric at Utrecht University. In his book we find the aversion to state interference, the importance of classical studies in the university *curriculum* and a more pedagogical approach to the students. Already in the first chapter of the book Van Heusde explored the term liberal. Liberal, he wrote, "is the word of our century,

8 One of the reasons the government didn't get grip on the quality of these schools was that they were municipal institutions and not – like in Prussia – state institutions. See: W. E. Krul, "De Nederlandse gymnasia in de negentiende eeuw", in M. A. Wes (ed.), *Van Parthenon tot Maagdenhuis. Moet het gymnasium blijven? Amsterdam*, Amsterdam, De Arbeiderspers, 1985, p. 36–60.

9 Roëll, *Rapport der commissie...*, *op. cit.*, p. 230–235. The commission proposed a public examination by a permanent commission, preferable comprised of university professors.

10 *Drie vertoogen over het Hooger Onderwijs door eenen welmenenden opmerker*, 's Gravenhage, A. Kloots, 1830, p. 61–62.

11 Ph. W. van Heusde, *Brieven over den aard en de strekking van Hooger Onderwijs*, Utrecht, Johannes Altheer, 1829. Transl.: *Letters Concerning the Nature and Purpose of Higher Education*. Also: L. Dorsman, "Universities in the Netherlands", in D. Tamm (ed.), *The Elite University: Roles and Models*, Copenhagen, The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 2017, p. 43–60.

and who does not rejoice?”.¹² To him the idea of freedom slowly developed in the eighteenth century, but the germ of freedom blossomed in the nineteenth century and this idea of freedom, of liberalism or liberality (Van Heusde used these terms alternating) was what for him defined the university. His opinion about the relationship between universities and freedom was, however, ambiguous. Freedom meant freedom from too much state interference, but to him freedom did not mean total freedom for students: they were young and generally not very much disciplined. They needed guidance in their studies, which had consequences. In the Netherlands the word often used far into the twentieth century for university is “Hoogeschool”, literally High School. Van Heusde sometimes also used this terminology to emphasize that a university was also a school and a school needed a programme. Interesting in Van Heusde is that for him being a student was the last phase of youth. And every phase in the development of a child into an adolescent needed a specific didactical and pedagogical approach. It was the first time that these originally eighteenth-century notions were extended to the university.¹³

What we see here in the book by Van Heusde is the core of an ongoing discussion until the law of 1876 was implemented: it is all about “liberty”, “freedom” and the like, while at the same time it is clear that there is a tension between the different meanings of these terms. It shows a tension between freedom defined as freedom from state interference, freedom for universities to design their teaching programmes themselves and the freedom for students not to be forced in a determined, obligatory study path. And this is also what we see in discussions about the subject of the entrance examination. Interestingly - and telling - this entrance examination was from the 1830s on known as the *Staats-examen* or state examination.¹⁴ It was only after ca. 1850 that the term *Staats-examen* was also used for examinations that were meant to enrol in a profession, like general practitioners or engineers.

¹² Van Heusde, *Brieven...*, *op. cit.*, p. 3-17.

¹³ In his P. Bosscha, *Gemeenzame brieven over vaderlandsche belangen*, Amsterdam, Gebroeders Diederichs, 1833, p. 117, professor Petrus Bosscha from the Athenaeum in Deventer, considered students as children. Although he was explicitly against state interference, he saw state responsibility in this respect. Like Van Heusde, for Bosscha the core of the academic *curriculum* was the classical heritage.

¹⁴ Although this contribution focuses on entrance examinations there were two other much debated issues: 1) should it be possible to admit students to final exams to obtain an academic degree without enrolment at the university and, related, 2) if a student did matriculate, how free was he to make his own choice of subjects and would it be permitted to follow his subjects in an order that he himself was able to define. In other words, this was first of all about the freedom to study *where* one wanted - at another university, by self-study or whatever - and, second, the freedom *how* to study by creating a study path or a programme oneself. It sounds almost like the Humboldtian “Lernfreiheit”, although this reference was nowhere made.

The debate on the Staats-examen

In the 1840s criticism on higher education in the Netherlands again grew to new heights. In newspaper editorials, in journals, pamphlets and books the government was accused for not taking responsibility. At last it was decided, by Royal Decree n^o 25 of 23 May 1845, to impose entrance examinations. The preliminary text to the decree read that the experience over the years proved that many students arrived at the university insufficiently prepared and that it was important to achieve more uniformity and standardization at the entrance to the universities. Also the need for more severity in the examinations was mentioned.

Each year a committee of 7 members, a Royal Commissioner included, was to be appointed which would sit in August.¹⁵ The decree also required a list of subjects to be examined. Furthermore it was prescribed that a student failed the examination if more than one member of the committee judged the performance below standard. The last article of the decree stipulated that no one was allowed entrance to a university without a signed certificate provided by the committee.

All in all, this decree was an almost exact copy of the ideas of the 1828 Royal Commission. The difference was that the comments on the commission's proposal then were not so loud and outspoken as they were now in 1845.¹⁶ Part of the objections against the examination came from the Latin Schools and Gymnasia and the advocates of classical education. They were afraid that all kinds of institutions would offer courses to train students for the examination which would result in a decline of the number of Latin Schools and Gymnasia.¹⁷ This objection is connected with the often ventilated fear that teaching risked being teaching to the test, mere training as one trains dogs and horses.

The objections were very diverse. Partly the *Staats-examen* was seen as unfair. In the first place, the candidates had to travel to a town somewhere in the country, which they would perceive as a hostile environment and as a reaction to that perform badly. Secondly, candidates from well to do and upper class families were in general more eloquent than middle class boys and less impressed by a committee of university professors and headmasters. But there was more to it. Testing the level of knowledge and insight in a discipline in one day for which candidates had worked for several years was bad testing. Also, such a test gave only a random indication: some students grew intellectually slower than others. Often heard

15 In 1845 the Royal Commissioner was a member of the Supreme Court, furthermore the commission consisted of three university professors and three headmasters.

16 It is for reasons of space not possible to mention here all the articles and brochures on this subject. They can be found by searching for "Staats-examen" in *Delpher*, the search tool for digitized sources provided by the Dutch Royal Library (<https://www.delpher.nl/>).

17 Indeed, within a year we find advertisements in Dutch newspapers from boarding schools that offer such courses to pass the *Staats-examen*.

also was the complaint that the *Staats-examen* was the wrong answer to a real existing problem. If the quality of Gymnasias and Latin Schools was so miserable, why not start with reorganizing those schools instead of tormenting their pupils with a stressful examination? Finally, bad experiences in other countries were mentioned to oppose the *Staats-examen*, particularly in Belgium and Prussia.

An interesting and consequential opinion was already vented in 1845 on behalf of the senate of Leiden university by law professor Johan Rudolf Thorbecke (1798-1872). In this note to the curators of the university Thorbecke defended the freedom of study, which was an argument that was very common to many university professors. There was a category of students, Thorbecke argued, that came to the university just to develop their minds. The university for Thorbecke was “an institution for general, free scientific education”.¹⁸ Those who wanted such an education should not be kept out. In 1849 Thorbecke had become prime minister under the new liberal constitution of 1848 and also minister of internal affairs who was responsible for education. In a letter to the king in 1850 he argued that the entrance examination was not the right way to test the adequacy of a student to study at the university and he also repeated an argument mentioned before that it was only meant to test the Latin Schools and not the students. And in the end there was also a practical argument to get rid of these examinations, namely that it was not really possible for a national committee to examine all candidates in the whole country. This could be concluded from the first annual report of the committee itself. For 15 days it sat somewhere in The Hague. Already this first time in 1845 there were 131 candidates, a number that grew every year.¹⁹

For the next years Thorbecke struggled to abandon the entrance examination. In the meantime he suggested a for him acceptable middle ground: maybe it was possible to distinguish between two kinds of students: on the one hand students who came to the university to gain knowledge as such and who wanted to specialise in “a certain branch of knowledge”, as he called it, and on the other hand those who came to the university for a degree that guaranteed certain competences, such as general practitioners or lawyers. For this last category of students Thorbecke suggested that they did an entrance examination. That resembled ideas developed by the Utrecht professor of philosophy Cornelis Opzoomer (1821-1892) who in 1849 proposed to establish two very different academic titles: the Doctor and the Master. The first one was for those who came to practice science and the second could be awarded to those who came to learn a profession.²⁰

18 J. R. Thorbecke, *Briefwisseling van J.R. Thorbecke*, ed. G. J. Hooykaas, vol. 4, 1840-1845, 's Gravenhage, Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 1993, p. 306-308.

19 Thorbecke, Hooykaas, *Briefwisseling...*, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, 1840-1845, 's Gravenhage, Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 1993, p. 263-266.

20 C. W. Opzoomer, *De hervorming onzer hoogeschoolen*, Leiden/Amsterdam, J. H. Gebhard en comp., 1849, p. 38-45. This brochure was the minority report by Opzoomer of a State Commission that was

Neither the idea of Thorbecke nor the suggestion of Opzoomer materialized, but Thorbecke managed to persuade the king to change by Royal Decree the entrance examinations in 1850 radically.²¹ It was a curious solution. Everyone who wanted to matriculate in a university had to sit for the examination, but the examination itself could not prevent someone to go to the university. The examination was meant, so the decree said, to provide an opportunity to get an overview of the quality of the Gymnasia and Latin Schools.

From that moment on the *Staats-examen* also became a subject in the deliberations in parliament (Lower Chamber). Although there was no majority to put an end to the examinations, two lines of thought could be discerned. The first one was that the *Staats-examen* should be temporary. It was clear that in this the government had two assignments. The first was to set up a functioning schools inspectorate, which should make the examinations superfluous and the second was to speed up the drawing of an integrated law on higher education which would replace the system of governing by Royal Decrees. The second line of thought was that some members of parliament asked for final examinations. Those examinations would provide freedom for the students to study how and what they wanted, but would prevent students to enter society without any intellectual luggage. This was especially seen as important for medical professions and for lawyers.²²

Thorbecke could initially live with the solution of an entrance examination without the possibility to fail because it gave the opportunity of entrance to the university for those who came only for intellectual reasons and didn't search for a profession. However, by decree n° 136 of 4 August 1852 the *Staats-examen* was abolished and it was announced that entrance to the university from then on was (again) unrestricted. Not everyone was happy with this decision. The liberal newspaper *Arnhemse Courant* saw the paradox: as liberals they were happy with the disappearance of the entrance examination, but they also saw that there still was no final examination and no schools inspectorate.²³ In the end a new, and less liberal, government decided in 1853, by decree of 4 August, that no diploma or examination was required for those who wanted to follow lessons at the university, but that those who wanted to sit for an academic examination and obtain an academic grade needed a diploma of a Latin school or a Gymnasium, which was for the most part falling back to the pre-1845 situation. Those students who didn't

set up to prepare a new law on higher education. The commission was internally divided and in the end was dismissed.

21 Thorbecke, Hooykaas, "J. R. Thorbecke to king Willem III", in *Briefwisseling...*, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 263-265; Royal Decree n° 36, 1 July 1850.

22 For instance *Handelingen der Tweede Kamer* 21 December 1850 and 2 December 1851, and again - to no avail - extensively on 26 November 1855. See: <https://www.statengeneraaldigitaal.nl/>.

23 *Arnhemse Courant*, 2 September 1852.

have a diploma of one these schools and still wanted to participate in academic examinations were given the opportunity to sit for an examination by members of the faculty of Letters and Philosophy. This was exactly the arrangement of the later law on higher education of 1876, so all in all despite sometimes heated debates nothing changed.²⁴

The entrance examination was a much debated issue in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century, but not only there. In the discussions in the 1850's in the Netherlands references were made to Belgium where such an examination was introduced *and* abolished. Also the highly praised Prussian school system was mentioned as an example where entrance examinations didn't seem to work.²⁵ The idea of an entrance examination was not just an isolated issue, but a complex matter and the situation in the Netherlands, not surprisingly, shows much similarity to what happened in other countries. It is possible to distinguish five related elements in the debate on the entrance examination. One important feature is the role of the state. Already in the coming about of the Royal Decree of 1815 a greater role of the new centralized state is visible: education from then on was a national issue with state intervention in the realm of examinations and graduation.²⁶ At the same time a tension developed between state intervention and liberal ideas which showed some uneasiness with the role of the state. That in the discussions the entrance examination was named *Staats-examen* was telling.

Related to this was the second, fundamental, question what the essence of the university was: a professional school or a scientific institution to serve individuals who came for "free studies". If the latter was true, and this was a much adhered

24 Even in the two decades between the 1853 decree and the 1876 law the issue exercised many minds and it was discussed in newspapers and journals. Especially teachers and curators of the gymnasia were not happy with this decision: some students took only a few years of lessons in the gymnasia and then did the university examination (at Utrecht university, in a random year like 1857-1858: 14,5%). The debates in parliament on the 1876 law are perfectly summarized and historically contextualized in B. J. L. de Geer van Jutfaas, *De Wet op het Hooger Onderwijs. Uit de gewisselde stukken en de gehouden Beraadslagingen toegelicht*, Utrecht, J. Bijleveld, 1877. It gives the complete text of the law, together with the parliamentary debates.

25 See also R. D. Anderson, *Education and opportunity in Victorian Scotland*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1989, for the struggle to introduce an entrance examination to the university. Also: W. Rüegg (ed.), *A History of the University in Europe*, vol. 3, Cambridge, CUP, 2004, several places, see index.

26 The initial impetus for this can be found in the unitarian tendencies of the 1790's and the French dominated first decade of the nineteenth century: W. W. Mijnhardt, J. J. Kloek, *1800: Blueprints for a National Community*, New York, Royal Van Gorcom/Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. For this process see also N. Hammerstein, "Vom Interesse des Staates. Graduierungen und Berechtigungswesen im 19. Jahrhundert", in R. C. Schwinges (ed.), *Examen, Titel, Promotionen. Akademisches und Staatliches Qualifikationswesen vom 13. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert*, Basel, Schwabe, 2007, p. 169-195, esp. p. 171: "Die Universitäten wurden nicht mehr als eine scheinbar in sich ruhende und privilegierte Korporation angesehen und akzeptiert...".

opinion, there was no place at the university for an entrance examination. Still, it became also clear that the state had a duty to protect its subjects from harmful practices, which was the reason that in 1865 a “Law on the practice of medicine” was enacted. Under this law compulsory medical finals came into existence.

A third element in the debate, and this is central to discussions in other countries as well, is the quality of secondary schools. It was recognized that a great part of the students that went to the university was insufficiently prepared for this step. It was also clear that the government didn’t have grip on this situation and was apparently incapable to take action. The consequence was that in the Netherlands an entrance examination was introduced to tackle problems in the secondary school system.

Not very often used as an explicit argument, but always present in the background, were pedagogical ideas about students as young adults who needed guidance and were not always able to make the right decisions in the light of their future. This is a fourth element in the debate on entrance examinations, which can be extended to discussions on the parallel question if a fixed course programme was desirable: was it sensible to suppose that students were disciplined enough to follow a path of “vrije studiën” (free studies)?

The fifth and last element in the debate on the entrance examination was the antithesis between neo-humanists and the advocates of the modern natural sciences. Like elsewhere also in the Netherlands there was a strong movement that considered the classical tradition as indispensable to an academic training. In the light of the entrance examination this meant that there was a strong lobby from the gymnasias and Latin schools for a secondary school diploma as an entrance ticket to the university.²⁷

Although it is clear that the short-lived entrance examination did not solve any problem, albeit it laid bare how bad some of the secondary schools were, it is a perfect case to show in which complex field of force the Dutch university system in the nineteenth century operated.

27 Officially the use of Latin as the university lingua franca was abolished in the law of 1876, but in practice it largely disappeared in the 1850’s and 1860’s. For the position of classical studies and its relation to the role of the classics in society, see W. E. Krul, “De klassieke studiën in de negentiende eeuw”, *De Negentiende Eeuw*, 13, 1989, p. 69–84.